

# Restoration Raillery: The Use of Witty Repartee to Gain Power within Gendered Spaces of Restoration London

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The Restoration (1660-1688) is a period of English history which stands out for its reinstatement and introduction of cultural touchstones which had been limited by the tumultuous periods that preceded it, the Civil War (1642-1651) and the Interregnum (1649-1660). At the same time, the Restoration is often easily overshadowed by the Glorious Revolution (1688-1689). The Restoration, nestled between such vastly different and incongruous periods of English history, remains highly influential within satirical literature and theater due to the innovations and techniques developed during this time. Following the limiting Puritan rule of the Interregnum, the Restoration functioned as a cathartic release for writers and artists of London. At the same time, preceding the Revolution of 1688, the cultural output of the Restoration hinged upon the tastes and whims of Charles II, recently returned from exile with continental tastes and expectations, and his court who utilized their wit to gain the king's favor. London operated as the focal point for satirical output because of its increasing urbanization throughout the Restoration, which shaped playwrights and artists, as well as the cultural shifts which occurred as the site of Charles II's palace and playground of his libertine court.

Approaches to the study of Restoration theater and satire written in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century generally utilized literary criticism combined with some historical description of satirical

poetry and plays written by men of the court. These approaches were often biographical and written as a compendium of one author's work and only briefly mentioned the introduction of actresses onto the stage under Charles II. A noticeable shift from biography and insight into singular authors is noticeable throughout the literature of the 1960s and 70s, where the examination of themes takes hold as the defining approach to the study of Restoration culture. Following the development of thematic approaches to literature and theater of the Restoration, publications moved to an interdisciplinary approach which still holds sway today. Under examination of the impact of women's introduction to the stage during the Restoration, as well as studies of the development of satire and wit as it evolved within the unique environment of the period, an interdisciplinary approach combining history, literature, gender and sexuality, and aspects of other fields, grew into the dominant form of study of Restoration culture. This varied approach, which utilizes multiple fields, has allowed for nuanced dissections of specific aspects of court and theater culture, as well as audience reception and the factors that caused Restoration satire to develop into its own recognizable form among both male and female authors.

An early and impactful writer on Restoration culture, John Harold Wilson, in his 1958 study of actresses of the Restoration stage, *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration*, analyzed how the popularity of Restoration theater was relatively brief, but influential, particularly due to the advent of actresses.<sup>1</sup> *All the King's Ladies* is a forerunner of academic study which focused on the impact of Restoration actresses within theater culture and the society of upper-class London, something which Wilson points out in his own introduction as a "neglected subject" despite its importance.<sup>2</sup> His later contribution to the study of Restoration society and culture is *Court Satires of the Restoration*, a collection of satires written mainly for political advancement by men of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Harold Wilson, *All the King's Ladies: Actresses of the Restoration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), vii.

<sup>2</sup> Wilson, *All the King's Ladies*, viii.

court. While Wilson's previous work detailed the effects of newly implemented aspects of the Restoration on the development of culture within London, *Court Satires of the Restoration* tightens Wilson's scope to focus on the evolution of satire within political contexts. Wilson demonstrates how satire in previous English periods functioned as an essential aspect of popularity in both the theater and literature, while during the Restoration it became critical to political advancement and used as a personal attack of opponents by men within Parliament and the court of Charles II.<sup>3</sup>

Historical and literary inquiry into the importance of wit and satire within Restoration society gained traction throughout the 1960s and 70s. Alongside Wilson's *Court Satires of the Restoration*, other noteworthy works written in the same vein include Daniel Judson Milburn's *The Age of Wit* and the works of Thomas H. Fujimura. In *The Restoration Comedy of Wit*, as well as his article "*The Man of Mode* as a Comedy of Wit," Fujimura examined the importance of wit within Restoration audiences by the focus on *Truewits* within comedies of the 1660s and 70s.<sup>4</sup>

Gender began to be an integral factor in research of the Restoration during the 1990s.<sup>5</sup> Interdisciplinary research containing facets of historical inquiry, literary criticism, theater studies, and gender and sexuality theory are prevalent in recent publications which detail the effect of the theater and satire on different spheres of Restoration society. This method is reflected in Elizabeth Howe's *The First English Actresses: Women and Drama, 1660-1700*, which illustrates actresses' experiences attempting to support themselves through the theater, as well as

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<sup>3</sup> John Harold Wilson, *Court Satires of the Restoration* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1976), xii.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas H. Fujimura, "*The Man of Mode* as a Comedy of Wit," in *Restoration and Eighteenth Century Comedy*, ed. Scott McMillin (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1978), 505-512.

<sup>5</sup> Valerie Traub, "History in the Present Tense: Feminist Theories, Spatialized Epistemologies, and Early Modern Embodiment," in *Mapping Gendered Routes and Spaces in the Early Modern World*, ed. Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2015), 2.

audience reception and the role of the actress within Restoration society. An interdisciplinary approach rooted in literary criticism and gender theory is also evident within *Coyne and Crime in Restoration Comedy: Women's Desire, Deception, and Agency*, where Peggy Thompson investigates questions of women's agency in their performances within Restoration theater in combination with analyzing satire and Restoration concepts of gender. Diana Solomon's work, *Prologues and Epilogues of Restoration Theater: Gender and Comedy, Performance and Print*, is a recent publication which combines literary, theater, and gender studies. This work conveyed the nuances of prologues and epilogues of Restoration plays in creating spaces of female empowerment by establishing their own public personas and voicing opinion, tempered through wit and satiric delivery, whether the opinion belonged to the actress or the playwright.<sup>6</sup> These latter works also reflect a recent emphasis on prologues and epilogues in and how they relate to and portray aspects of Restoration culture.

This interdisciplinary approach is often influenced by the examination of the creation and intersection of social spaces. Research began to take a 'spatial turn' in the 1980s and the concept of a development of specific spaces is an identifiable theme within the examination of Restoration culture and society over the last decade.<sup>7</sup> For instance, the importance of identifying liminal space created by the actress onstage in crafting a public persona is throughout Diana Solomon's examination of Nell Gwyn's epilogues in *Prologues and Epilogues of Restoration Theater*. These spaces, developed as their own cultural spheres, often intersected and came to depend on each other for survival and approval within Restoration London. The theater was dependent on audience approval, while the audience looked to the Cavaliers of Charles II's court to know what was fashionable. At the same time, due to increased urbanization within England, satires of the

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<sup>6</sup> Diana Solomon, *Prologues and Epilogues of Restoration Theater: Gender and Comedy, Performance and Print* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2013), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Traub, "History in the Present Tense," 2.

Restoration often grappled with rural lifestyles and compared them to the urban lives of men of the court and women of the theater, whom critics of urban development often viewed as the embodiment of the dissolution of Puritan ideals espoused during the Interregnum.

While biographical study and compendiums of individual authors were the dominant form of presentation in earlier publications of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, biographical approaches did not disappear. Charles Beauclerk's biography of his ancestor, *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to a King*, published in 2005, centers around the life of the famed performer while including research into the function of actresses and importance of wit in the establishment of women within the court of Charles II. In utilizing Gwyn as "the embodiment of her age," Beauclerk traces the rise of Gwyn through the ranks of both the theater and her rise to becoming a staple in the royal court through her use of wit and beauty.<sup>8</sup> Despite centering the book around a Cinderella theme of a young girl who rose from poverty to the ranks of the elite through her love for her monarch, Beauclerk also addressed the integral function of wit in securing Gwyn's place within both the theater, and then the court society of Charles II and its exacting members.

Rarely have spheres of public opinion, politics, gender, sexual activity, and art converged and integrated so deeply and interdependently as in Restoration London. The careers of both men and women hinged on their ability to please audiences through inventive wordplay. Politics and theater came to depend upon the other's patronage in ways that survived the Restoration and influenced political satire through the modern era. The Restoration was the first-time English women were able to utilize wit and satire in order to establish a public identity of political agency through critique of men of the court and their own audience during performances. The interconnectedness of satire, wit, politics, and increasing female agency marks the Restoration as a singular era where varied and previously disparate spheres not only

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<sup>8</sup> Charles Beauclerk, *Nell Gwyn: Mistress to A King* (New York: Grove Press, 2005), 1.

interacted, but also came to depend upon each other for success. The effects of this interconnectedness within Restoration London have created reverberations since Charles II and his provocative court were restored and the role of women within English theater was cemented.

Contemporary writers describe the Restoration as a period of increased importance in wit, satire, and invective wordplay. During the 1660s, printed mentions of wit and incivility drastically increased in comparison to previous decades of English history.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Restoration, wit and well-executed satire provided political power to men within Parliament, who used satirical writings to undercut their opponents, and witty repartee to stay in the good graces of Charles II. Due to the reinstatement of theatrical companies under the king in 1660 and following a decree in 1662, women were finally allowed to perform on the stage as actresses. This opportunity allowed women, especially of lower classes, to move upward within Restoration society using their lively, engaging performances and court conversation to win the favor of the court wits who controlled popular opinion within London. Both of these spheres capitalized on and encouraged the idolization of wit during the Restoration, and both groups gained social and cultural power within their gendered spaces.

The definition of wit varies among the plethora of Restoration era sources. For instance, in David Abercromby's *A Discourse of Wit* (1685), he referred to the concept of wit as something so well known within English society that it becomes hard to define. Abercomby pointed out that even those with the reputation as the most intelligent and humorous Englishmen found themselves at odds when pressed to define wit.<sup>10</sup> Other attempts to define wit, raillery, humorous invectives and 'satyr' were made by natural philosophers and clergymen alike and often used by these men to support their political stances. In Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, for instance, he discussed the elusive nature of wit and

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<sup>9</sup> Phil Withington, "Tumbled into the Dirt: Wit and Incivility in Early Modern England," *Journal of Historic Pragmatics*, 12, no. 1-2 (2011): 162.

<sup>10</sup> David Abercromby, *A Discourse of Wit*, (London, UK: 1686), 3.

referred to it as partly pre-determined and partly provided through proper education: “The causes of this difference of wits are in the passions; and the difference of passions proceedeth partly from the different constitution of the body, and partly from different education.”<sup>11</sup> Throughout this section of *Leviathan*, Hobbes used the discussion of wit in order to discredit the arguments of his rivals.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes acknowledged wit was a tool used to gain power. Hobbes posited that wit allowed men to pursue riches, knowledge, and honor, “All which may be reduced to the first, that is, desire of power. For riches, knowledge, and honour, are but several sorts of power.”<sup>12</sup> The discussion of the existence and definition of wit plagued not only Hobbes but various Englishmen known for their intellect. Through exchanges of ideas in letters, William Davenant and Hobbes came to discuss the lack of wit within Puritan religion in the midst of the Interregnum. In the same vein, in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke portrayed wit as a sign of lack of proper judgement in men, in order to critique politics he did not agree with, stating, “men who have a great deal of wit, and prompt memories, have not always the clearest judgment or deepest reason.”<sup>13</sup> Philosophers and politicians in London questioned the origins of satire and wit during the Restoration period to justify thoughts on intelligence in general, whether it was ingrained or learned, and whether it was reserved for a certain class of people.

What can be positively backed up by scholarship pertaining to the wit of the Restoration is the unified effort on the part of members of the court as well as contributors to the arts to create a society in which clever wordplay and satirical disputation were prized among all other aspects of social interaction. Wits were rarely seen, but invaluable to a cultured and worldly society. A majority of those who discussed the concept posited the rarity of

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909), Chapter 8, Paragraph 14.

<sup>12</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chapter 8, Paragraph 15.

<sup>13</sup> John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, Part 1* (1689), Chapter 6, Paragraph 2.

‘true wits’, and the invaluable contributions of them to the creation of cultured and worldly aspects of London society. Rather than divine a consensus on who was actually qualified to be a *Truewit*, it is instead important to note that different groups and social classes had their own definition of wit that carried over into their interactions with each other. While men of the court valued satirical barbs in order to undercut their political enemies, what they desired from women of the theater was wit enough to humor and entertain, sometimes outsmarting the audience but always with a wink and a smile. At the same time, men of the court often did not approve of upper-class women who attempted to act in the same manner. Some clever social climbers could utilize wit in different contexts to transcend their social class. The environment created by the Restoration which this possible.

Wit and satire were often referenced within Restoration plays themselves, particularly in their prologues and epilogues, but also throughout character interactions. When referencing wit within their own plays, playwrights would often subtly refer to their own writing or the writing of their competitors. For example, in Dryden’s play *The Rival Ladies*, a discussion of wit takes place between a servant and a poet with the servant asking:

Sirrah, Rascal,  
Is this an Age for Ribaldry in Verse;  
When every Gentleman in Town, speaks it  
With so much better grace, than thou canst write it?<sup>14</sup>

In Restoration comedy, the wittiest writer held the power. Wit was a sought after attribute used in order to draw both the King’s and the Duke of York’s support, as well as their Cavalier followers.

When Charles II returned to England, he granted theater rights to two members of his cohort, Thomas Killigrew and William Davenant. Both Killigrew and Davenant were renowned throughout London as court wits. Killigrew ran the King’s

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<sup>14</sup> John Dryden, *The Rival Ladies* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 31-34.



Company, while Davenant ran the company of the Duke of York. This monopolized patronage gave complete control of Restoration theater to Killigrew and Davenant, and through them, Charles II. After returning from exile in 1660, Charles II brought with him cultural tastes picked up from his travels across Europe. Due to his developed taste, he was a “constant presence” in the theaters in London, and created a theatrical society within the city run by the witty few who gained his approval.<sup>15</sup>

Within the majority of theatrical comedies during the Restoration was an underlying political satirization. After being reinstated by Charles II, theaters experienced a resurgence in popularity with audiences who had been starved for cultural sustenance during the year of the Interregnum. Satire gave writers and audiences a chance to expel their frustrations with the government and church through scathing commentary of Puritan rule, while remaining in the good graces of Charles II. Portrayals of clergy and jokes at the expense of the Puritans were common. Most plays had a royalist perspective and portrayed the English monarchy in a favorable light, due to their dependence on the support of the theater by both the King and the Duke of York. Humor was used to combat the societal trauma inflicted upon London during England’s Civil War, making the comedic satires within Restoration England extremely popular in comparison to other types of theater. Humor, which undercuts painful, long-term effects of communal lived experience, is an identifier of satire, one that runs throughout the literature of the Restoration.<sup>16</sup> After the regicide of Charles I, the Civil War, and the intensely stifling Puritan ideals forced upon England by Oliver Cromwell, Restoration society craved outlets in which to celebrate their long repressed self-expression, as well as critique the events of the previous decades.

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew R. Walking, “Politics and Theatrical Culture in Restoration England”. *History Compass*, 5, no. 5 (2007): 1501.

<sup>16</sup> Jerome Neu, *The Philosophy of Insults* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 229.

This focus on wit and satire was not limited to the theater. Among the men in the King's court, raillery was a tool used to subvert and dominate political threats. Examples of the use of wit in order to take down political enemies abound in the work of Andrew Marvell. Marvell's "Poems on Affairs of the State", "The Character of Holland", and "Instructions to a Painter" represent the subversive satirical critiques Marvell used in order to secure his place as Member of Parliament (MP) in the Cavalier Parliament. Often, these satirical critiques were published anonymously, with the author revealed at a later date, and contained language and character assassinations that would not be acceptable in parliamentary meetings. For example, in order to sabotage the political status of adversary Edward Hyde, the Duke of Clarendon, Marvell skewered him in "Clarendon's Housewarming" and "The Last Instructions." Nigel Smith cites the importance of the intelligence behind Marvell's wit in the popularity of his "Instructions to a Painter," a critique on the British handling of the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-1667). Smith points out that while Marvell was not the first political satirist in Parliament, he "took the mode to new extremes of pointed refinement, exploiting the symbolic association of distended courtly bodies and a deformed body politic" and through his approach further popularized scathing satires on the very Parliament in which he was a prominent member.<sup>17</sup>

During the Restoration, wit could function as a replacement for physical duels, and in doing so, absorbed certain aspects of dueling. The language of duels is often applied to satirical insults, including terms such as barbs and repartee.<sup>18</sup> In the end, an enemy would be defeated in battle, whether a battle of wits or of swords, and the defeat reverberated throughout Restoration society with much the same effect. Wit was often used by the elites in London in order to solve disagreements over contestations of honor, particularly insults to manhood. During and in decades following

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<sup>17</sup> Nigel Smith, *Andrew Marvell: The Chameleon* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 202.

<sup>18</sup> Neu, *The Philosophy of Insults*, 115.

the Restoration, public defamation gained popularity in comparison to the previous forms of physical dueling, which, although still in practice, began to decline in favor of invective wordplay.<sup>19</sup>

Charles II encouraged the use of wit to settle disagreements within the court through the sponsorship of friends such as Killigrew and Davenant, but reacted strongly when satirical critiques went too far against himself. After the reinstitution of the monarchy in 1660, Charles II imposed rules of strict censorship on the printed word.<sup>20</sup> An example of the King's negative reaction to jocular wordplay aimed in his direction was his reaction to William Coventry's implications of the King sleeping with actors and actresses throughout London. After joking about the King in session, Parliament was released for Christmas recess and Coventry was attacked by soldiers who mangled the end of his nose.<sup>21</sup> Following the attack the King released the soldiers from prison in order to send a clear message to Coventry that these witty attacks were not appropriate when directed at the King's person.

Wit was usually seen as the dominion of males in high London society, and when threatened they tended to become territorial in their attacks. Despite the number of female playwrights who successfully targeted and satirized their male detractors, being a female writer was not an easy task in Restoration London. Women faced various hurdles at the prospect of writing during the Restoration, not the least of which included the association throughout English society that wit was a masculine trait, and by publishing their work, women would be identifying themselves as meddling with expected standards of femininity.<sup>22</sup> Women who refused to publish anonymously faced the possibility of intense backlash, particularly from the men

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<sup>19</sup> Robert B. Shoemaker, "Reforming Male Manners: Public Insult and the Decline of Violence in London, 1660-1740," in *English Masculinities 1660-1800*, ed. Tim Hitchcock and Michele Cohen (London: Longman, 1999), 134.

<sup>20</sup> Smith, *Andrew Marvell*, 191.

<sup>21</sup> Smith, *Andrew Marvell*, 236.

<sup>22</sup> Angeline Goreau, *Reconstructing Aphra: A Social Biography of Aphra Behn* (New York: Dial Press, 1980), 149.

known for their ingenious raillery. It was not only the female writers themselves who were at risk of public debasement, but their husbands as well. Men who ‘allowed’ their wives to write were disparaged publicly as coerced cuckolds.

Despite being in a position in which they must defend themselves and their intelligence, women writers were even more at the mercy of pleasing their audience than their male counterparts, which reflected the opinions and tastes of the culturally sophisticated court wits. If comedic playwrights could not satisfy the demands of the Cavaliers and court wits, their plays were doomed to fail according to popular opinion within the society of Restoration London. This meant subverting the accepted character of the Rake by adopting canny wordplay and intricate plot devices. A common theme used by female playwrights to accomplish this was that of the female cross-dresser, who would present their wit through a character styled as a male and reveal themselves as female later on in the play.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, playwrights also used wit in order to symbolize the figurative maiming or death of a character within the comedies of the Restoration. For instance, in the prologue of William Davenant’s *The Wits*, Davenant writes:

Conceive now too how much, how oft each ear  
Hath surfeited in this our hemisphere  
With various, pure, eternal wit, and then,  
My fine young comic sir, you’re kill’d again.<sup>24</sup>

Through satirization and repartee, Englishmen, and some women, would effectively retain their dominance and defeat their enemies in duels of words.

Court wits and Cavaliers did not only aim their conversational barbs and satirical writing at each other, but also at

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<sup>23</sup> Leah Lowe, “Gender and (Im)Morality in Restoration Comedy: Aphra Behn’s *The Feigned Courtesans*,” in *Theater Symposium* 15, (2007): 101.

<sup>24</sup> William Davenant, *The Wits*. From *Six Caroline Plays*, ed. A.S. Knowland (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), Prologue to *The Wits*.

various women of the court, particularly those who were interested in acting. James Grantham Turner, in *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London*, analyzed the backlash of court wits towards actresses. In an examination of William Wycherley's portrayal of Barbara Palmer, the Lady Castlemaine and Duchess of Cleveland, Turner noted that Wycherley's attacks are less humorous than hurtful: "his bitter drollery also encompasses those like the duchess herself who avow their desire openly, who distrust the clear hierarchy of active-male and passive male by taking the initiative."<sup>25</sup> Wycherley's scorn for sexually progressive females in Restoration London was not rare among the wits of the court, but their attacks were focused on women typically of their own social class. While it was acceptable for someone of the lower classes, such as Nell Gwynn, to put their beauty and wit on display on the stage, it was distasteful among upper-class women. These attacks were not without rebuttals. Various female playwrights attempted to subvert the wits of the men of the court by putting their female characters into positions in which they could denigrate them. Elizabeth Thomas, for instance, used the perspective of women in relationships with rakish males to her advantage, pointing out their incivility from a sardonic, female perspective.<sup>26</sup> By pointing out the hypocrisy and incivility of the libertine Cavaliers, writers like Elizabeth Thomas and Aphra Behn defended the independence and wit of women.

Another common theme in comedies among playwrights of the Restoration was a negative portrayal of romantic relationships.<sup>27</sup> Restoration era comedies often portrayed women as domineering in their relationships with men. For instance, in Dryden's *The Rival Ladies* the character of Constance attempts to overpower her love interest through their interactions in an attempt to make him fall in love with her. Despite her attempts, he remains

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<sup>25</sup> James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics, and Literary Culture, 1630-1685* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 206.

<sup>26</sup> Turner, *Libertines and Radicals*, 229.

<sup>27</sup> *The Works of John Dryden, Vol. VII*, ed. H.T. Swedenberg (New York, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1956), 238.

aloof, and in doing so wins her over. While the resistance to female dominance is evident, as well as an inevitability of male dominance within the courtship of Restoration comedy, the women are still portrayed as independent agents, with their own wit, which contributes to their desirability. In the same play, the character Isabel is written as particularly perceptive and biting in her repartee, and still retains a positive portrayal. The importance of humorous invectives within the relationships in Restoration comedy is the reflection of the anti-romanticism felt by the wits of the period.

Similar to the theme of anti-romanticism, an underlying anti-social current also runs throughout Restoration comedy. In their comedies, playwrights would often target not only political figures and institutions, but also people's relationships and conceptual feelings, such as fondness and enthusiasm.<sup>28</sup> These satirical attacks on affection created an atmosphere of constant judgement, which in turn encouraged further mockery, often done by the female characters within these comedic plays.

In their performances, actresses took on roles which featured varied interpretations of female sexuality. This often meant the use of coyness for a character to deny sexual desire on the surface, while implying the opposite to the audience.<sup>29</sup> Female sexuality had been portrayed in English theater before the Restoration, but due to the introduction of actresses to the stage, the portrayals of sexual agency grew more common but not necessarily more nuanced. While the audience consisted of a substantial amount of men, including those of the upper class who had access to many of the actresses after their performances, a variety of plays began to feature visible rape scenes. Depictions of rape in English theater prior to the Restoration typically occurred offstage with dialogue used in the place of physical performance to

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Hikaru Fujimura, *The Restoration Comedy of Wit* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1952), 4.

<sup>29</sup> Peggy Thompson, *Coyness and Crime in Restoration Comedy: Women's Desire, Deception, and Agency* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2012), 2.

allow the audience to understand what had occurred.<sup>30</sup> On the Restoration stage, however, rapes were not only commonly portrayed, but also portrayed in a sexual manner. One reason for the sexualized depictions of rape on stage was to put actresses physically on display while retaining some of the character's feminine modesty.<sup>31</sup> Popular actresses such as Nell Gwyn were closely associated with the characters they played, and if an actress were to depict an unsavory character, such as a sexually immodest woman, there existed a risk that the audience would associate a character's negative characteristics with the actress.

Jeremy Collier, in his *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage*, a treatise published in the 1690s that critiqued Restoration era theater, put forth his thoughts on the effects of the theater upon women in. After painting the entire institution of Restoration theater as immoral, Collier described the effects of playwrights upon women by accusing them of forcing the women to "speak smuttily" as well as depicting them as dishonest whores. Not only does the incivility of the playhouse affect actresses, but also the women of the audience: "Swearing in the Playhouse is an ungentlemanly, as well as an unchristian Practice. The Ladies make a considerable part of the Audience. Now Swearing before Women is reckon'd a Breach of good Behaviour; and therefore a civil Atheist will forbear it."<sup>32</sup> Collier reflects the religious sentiments of the Restoration period in England. Despite moving on from Puritan rule, holdovers from the era still preached against immorality within the arts throughout England, particularly where women were involved.

Collier found the satirical aspect of the theater to be in poor taste, particularly in regards to the portrayals of the church. In his treatise, he accused the playwrights of attacking particular clergy

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<sup>30</sup> Jean I. Marsden, "Rape, Voyeurism, and the Restoration Stage," in *Broken Boundaries: Women & Feminism in Restoration Drama*, ed. Katherine M. Quinsey (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 186.

<sup>31</sup> Marsden, "Rape, Voyeurism, and the Restoration Stage," 185.

<sup>32</sup> Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English State: Together With the Sense of Antiquity Upon this Argument* (London, UK. 1698), 59.

members and, in doing so, partaking in offensive “buffoonery.”<sup>33</sup> At the same time, Collier attacked the profanity used by many playwrights within their pieces. He finished his critique of the theater by lambasting the casting and depiction of libertines and through their inclusion validated their immoral lifestyles by “giving them success in their debauchery.”<sup>34</sup> To Collier, it was enough that the playwrights must include rakes and libertines in their plays, but it went much too far that their lifestyles were justified through humorous banter and plot devices.

In the same vein, John Selden, who discussed his opinions on various topics in letters written during the Restoration and published posthumously in 1689, also wrote on the topic of wit in women. Selden was not completely against the use of wit, but took it upon himself to be sure that wit and satire were used properly within Restoration society. Selden believed wit must be civil, and, in order to assure its civility, it must be acknowledged that not all men were created to be witty, echoing Hobbe’s earlier description. He also believed that wit’s use by women should be avoided at all cost: “Women ought not to know their own Wit, because they will still be shewing it, and so spoil it; like a child that will continually be shewing its fine new Coat, till at length it all bedawbs it with its Pah-hands.”<sup>35</sup> According to Selden, the idea of showing intelligence through wit might be tempting to some women, but was entirely unacceptable and uncivil to the whole sex.

Differences of opinion concerning women of Restoration London and their possession of wit abound within publications of the era. Whereas Selden found wit to be unconscionable in women, David Abercromby, in his *Discourse of Wit* from 1686, declared that women do possess wit, and oftentimes, more than men. Abercromby acknowledged the arguments made against the existence of wit in women, citing the Bible and referring to women as being composed of Adam’s rib and not his brains. Despite these

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<sup>33</sup> Collier, *A Short View*, 97.

<sup>34</sup> Collier, *A Short View*, 8.

<sup>35</sup> John Selden, *Table-Talk: Being the Discourses of John Selden, Esq: or His Sence of Various Matters of Weight and Consequence Relating Especially to Religion and State* (London, UK: 1689). 167.



oppositional claims, Abercromby discussed the social exchange between women at parties as proof of their own wit. Later on in his discourse, Abercromby examines the importance of beauty to raillery and invective intelligence: “And if the beauty of the Soul be proportionable to that of the Body; we have reason to think that as they exceed our Sex in the former, so they have some considerable advantage over us in the latter too...”<sup>36</sup> According to Abercromby, a woman’s beauty can oftentimes be a premonition of her wit.

Despite the naysayers, witty women grew popular within Restoration theater, as long as they were the right *kind* of woman. The right kind of actress for comedy was of the lower classes, which made it more acceptable for her to act out of character which a modest woman should possess. The right kind of actress was also beautiful and quick-witted. All of these characteristics were perfectly embodied within Nell Gwynn, mistress to Charles II, who inspired many audience members to describe their experiences watching her, as well as galvanized many writers to create characters for her. Samuel Pepys, for instance, described his experiences with Gwynn with an underlying longing. After seeing her performance within Dryden’s *The Maiden Queen*, Pepys insisted, “when she comes in like a young gallant; and hath the notions and carriage of a spark the most that ever I saw any man have. It makes me, I confess, admire her.”<sup>37</sup> Within the same diary entry Pepys described being invited backstage and allowed to kiss Gwynn, and described her as “mighty pretty” and a fine comedic actress.<sup>38</sup> Through the combination of her beauty, as well as her wit, Gwynn defined the perfect combination of whimsicality and attractiveness, in conjunction with her lower class status, in order to satisfy the court wits and the audiences, which followed their whims. While actresses were undoubtedly seen as sexual objects and often written about voyeuristically, such as in the testimonies

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<sup>36</sup> Abercromby, *A Discourse of Wit*, 203.

<sup>37</sup> Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (Wednesday, January 23, 1666/7).

<sup>38</sup> Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*.

of Samuel Pepys, upper class men treated their roles with respect on a level other professions associated with women did not have.<sup>39</sup>

Men of the court saw wit as imperative in holding adequate conversation; to be known for tedious conversation would create precarious social standing within the upper classes. This carried over into the audiences of the theater, where members of the court would go in order to commingle with each other in a space encouraged by the patronage of the King and Duke of York. Pepys described being impressed with the witty conversation of an unknown woman in the audience of play on a night in February of 1666: "...being exceeding witty as ever I heard woman, did talk most pleasantly with him; but was, I believe, a virtuous woman, and of quality... He was mighty witty, and she also making sport with him very inoffensively, that a more pleasant 'rencontre' I never heard."<sup>40</sup> Pepys decided this was a woman of quality, despite not knowing who she was, due to her sharp conversation and ability to tease in a pleasant and civil manner.

Whimsical and engaging wordplay was not only expected by upper ranking members of society from each other, but also the actresses and plays themselves. In his *Ode of Wit*, Abraham Cowley, a poet of the mid-seventeenth century, described the importance of wit within the theater in order to provide fame to actors and actresses, as well as elevate the status of theater to that of an art. In the third stanza of his ode, Cowley addressed the integral role of witty characters within Restoration plays:

And Wits by our Creation they become,  
Just so, as Tit'lar Bishops made at Rome.  
'Tis not a Tale, 'tis not a Jest  
Admir'd with Laughter at a feast,  
Nor florid Talk which can that Title gain;

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<sup>39</sup> Deborah C. Payne, "Reified Object or Emergent Professional? Rethorizing the Restoration Actress," in *Cultural Readings of Restoration and Eighteenth-Century English Theater*, ed. J. Douglas Canfield and Deborah C. Payne (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 14.

<sup>40</sup> Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*.

The Proofs of Wit for ever must remain.<sup>41</sup>

Through his ode, Cowley showed that not only was a satirical and intelligent approach to culture a formative aspect of Restoration theater, but the creation of ‘wits’, particular people known for their incredibly biting repartee, was an important draw for attendance among Restoration audiences.

Through the writing of playwright Aphra Behn, not only was wit portrayed by her female characters but also specifically through the author’s overall style. Behn’s first play, *The Banished Cavaliers*, also referred to as *The Rover*, was a thinly veiled tale of experiences of Charles II during his exile. Throughout *The Banished Cavaliers*, Behn discusses the importance of wit to not only her characters but also her audience. For instance, in the epilogue, Behn writes

But tell me, pray,  
 What has the House of Commons done to day?  
 Than shews his Politicks, to let you see  
 Of State Affairs he’ll judge as notably,  
 As he can do of Wit and Poetry.  
 The younger Sparks, who hither do resort,  
 Cry-  
 Pox o’ your gentle things, give us more Sport;  
 -Damn me, I’m sure ’twill never please the Court.  
 Such Fops are never pleas’d unless the Play  
 Be stuff’d with Fools, as brisk and dull as they<sup>42</sup>

Through insulting her audience, Behn acknowledges their thirst for wit as well as her own satirical writing prowess. Behn’s *The Banished Cavaliers* was extremely popular and performances of it were frequented by Charles II, which resulted in the publication of

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<sup>41</sup> Abraham Cowley, *Ode of Wit*. From *The Book of Restoration Verse*, ed. William Braithwaite (New York: Brentano’s, 1910). Line 20-24.

<sup>42</sup> Aphra Behn, *The Banished Cavaliers/The Rover*. From *The Works of Aphra Behn, Vol. 1*. (New York: Phaeton Press, 1967), Epilogue.

a sequel. In her sequel, Behn once again acknowledges the interest in witty repartee among her audience, but this time attacked their lack of intellectual repartee in combination with their deep pockets in order to make her insults palatable:

From those who in our lofty Tire sit,  
Down to the dull State- Cullies of the Pit,  
Who have much Money, and but little Wit:  
Whose useful Purses, and whose empty Skulls  
To private Interest make ye Publick Tools<sup>43</sup>

Later in the same epilogue, Behn referred to dumbing down her own writing in order to satisfy the slow senses of her own audience. It is clear from her writing that Behn, as a female playwright, felt the need to flaunt her own wit in order to legitimize herself before her audience.

While women were granted some rights within the theater, it was in no way a woman's sphere. Most of the women who acted or held other jobs within the theater were related, typically through marriage, but sometimes through family, to the prominent men who worked there.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, most of the women behind the scenes, whether willingly or not, had to contend with plaintive suitors of the court. If a man was prominent enough within the court of Charles II he could visit the actresses backstage at any point throughout the night. If the man were not so well known by the players, he could pay a fee in order to cavort with the actresses.<sup>45</sup> These men tended to be the rakish libertines of the court, renowned for their quick wit. Actresses not only had to impress on the stage, but also behind the scenes, sometimes to mutual benefit of both the actresses and the men of the court, as the actresses were often considered to be akin to higher class

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<sup>43</sup> Behn, *The Banished Cavaliers/The Rover*, Prologue.

<sup>44</sup> Natasha Korda, *Labors Lost: Women's Work and the Early Modern Stage* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), 216.

<sup>45</sup> Rosamond Gilder. *Enter the Actress: The First Women in the Theater* (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1931), 149.

prostitutes.<sup>46</sup> A large number of actresses became mistresses to members of the court, and a lucky few became mistresses to the King.<sup>47</sup> This enabled them to use their positions in the theater and their display of wits and beauty in order to ascend levels of social hierarchy previously closed to them prior to the Restoration.

Wit occupied many roles within the social structure of Restoration London. Invective wordplay was used as a type of duel in order to subjugate and show political dominance by members of Parliament and the court. At the same time, witty teases were used as flirtation devices behind the scenes of the theater, as well as in the parties of London's high society. Wit and satire within the theater brought fame and social mobility to particular actresses while providing legitimacy and professionalization to actresses and female playwrights, and created presentations that were palatable to an audience not used to seeing women in such roles. These actresses, playwrights, court wits, and members of Parliament all connected through social interactions, particularly in the theater, due to the creation of the social atmosphere encouraged by the patronage of Charles II. Through the interdependency which grew out of the exchanges between these spheres, the utilization of wit and satire increased social mobility and legitimized careers, and in doing so impacted cultural development not only throughout the Restoration but in decades following, and created a legacy of satirical ingenuity.

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<sup>46</sup> Gilder, *Enter the Actress*, 150.

<sup>47</sup> Andrew R. Walking, "Politics and Theatrical Culture in Restoration England." *History Compass*, Vol. 5, Issue 5, 2007, 1513.